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DON RIGGS

Fantastic Tropes In *The Folk of the Air*

Peter Beagle's imagery in *A Fine and Private Place* and *The Last Unicorn* is rich and lyrical, the perception of this world's otherwordly beauty sharpened by the elegiac sense of the fragile nature of that beauty. In *The Folk of the Air*, images and figures of speech are at times lyrical, at times elliptical, sometimes almost to the point of being far-fetched, and occasionally so bizarre as nearly to defy interpretation. This technique takes the receptive reader on a roller-coaster ride through the baroque borderlands between the social construction of reality and what has been variously called the Void, the Absurd, and the Womb of Creation. Since the novel itself revolves around several small rips in the Veil of Illusion, allowing people from one time to wander into another, this use of descriptive imagery prepares the reader to accept these fantastic occurrences without question, and thus clears the way for evaluation of other issues beyond the suspension of disbelief. The way to alchemy is paved with good descriptions.

One of the earliest and most daring flights of descriptive fantasy is a clear example of *periphrasis*, which the Venerable Bede defines as "a circumlocution which either sumptuously sets down and protracts a brief statement or, through indirect speech, avoids saying something unpleasant" (Gallo, p. 169). The situation is that the protagonist Farrell has been held up by a hitchhiker, and threatens to smash his VW Microbus into a concrete pillar unless the hitcher throws his switchblade out the window. To add verisimilitude to his threat, Farrell composes a demented grin. Instead of stating it in such a bald fashion, however, Beagle writes:

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> He smiled a shut-mouthed crescent smile, which he hoped suggested a syphilitic picking up weather reports from Alpha Centauri on his bridgework (p. 9),

thus bringing the reader into the subjective reality of Farrell's temporary quasi-persona. Like John Belushi, Farrell is a method actor.

Another type of trope which results in a greater subjective participation in the presented world is related to Robert Graves' interpretation of the Arabic word *baraka* as "that charm, literal or figurative, which accrues to objects with generations of use." This personalizing type of description is used in relation to a sound Farrell makes in his tussle with the hitcher:

> As an afterthought, he also screamed "*Kreegaaahh*!" at the top of his lungs, for the first time since he was eleven years old, jumping off his parents' bed, which was the bank of the Limpopo river, onto his cousin, Mary Margaret Louise, who was a crocodile (p. 7).

With the deft stroke of this single epic simile, we see not only the scene of the surprise attack in the front seat of the VW, but also the fundamental innocence of Farrell, and, through the implied comparison with the cousin Mary Margaret Louise, the naïveté of the hitcher, who has, after all, been described previously as "19 or 20, brown-haired and pink-cheeked, neat as a new ice-cream cone" (p. 3). Of course, perhaps the point of this incident is that the hitcher is not in fact as innocent as he appears, just as within the soul of Mary Margaret Louise lies the savagery of a crocodile. The image points both ways, and the ambiguity runs throughout the novel.

Upon his return to Avicenna after years of absence, Farrell is confronted with much of his past karma, which Beagle merely suggests at one point quite schematically, implying a great wealth of experience by touching on details and allowing the reader to fill in the bulk (Ingarden, pp. 272–275). He teases us with an allusion to a major romance with Ellen which is to be withheld from us entirely. An omelette recipe is imbued with the personal in much the same way that a folk singer introduces the provenance of a song:

> Farrell added a special blend of herbs and spices, acquired from a Bolivian lawyer . . . for the lyrics of *Ode to Billie Joe* (p. 38).

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Such images imbue a cry or a recipe with personal history and energy, such as psychometrists may find in objects they touch to access the file in the Akashic records. This device in effect temporarily erases the boundary between past and present, "mixing memory and desire" and hinting at a shift from taste to hearing in the association of spices with music. Beagle uses synesthetic, leaping images to describe a sensation of uprootedness, often when Farrell talks to his best friend's lover, Sia. He refers to

> that moment in a conversation with Sia when the ground under his feet was gently gone, like a missed stair or curbstone, and he invariably lurched off-balance, as violently as when he twitched out of a falling dream (p. 24).

The image itself takes the reader through a disorienting series of perceptual shifts, from a conversation to the act of walking, to the kinesthetic sensation of missing a stair to the disoriented confusion between dreaming and waking, falling and lying down. At another time, Sia is discussing "the displaced ones" and the "uprooted" who come to her for counsel, while Farrell is playing a lute piece:

> The galliard, being played too fast, lost its center of gravity and flapped for balance like a child running downhill (p. 44).

In these cases, a conversation and a piece of music take on an ambulatory existence which requires a leap of the imagination on the part of the reader so as to be able to conceive of these activities in subjective terms, and furthermore to translate these activities into a different mode of existence. In this way, these images prepare the reader to accept the acts of transformation which occur later in the narrative, because such acts involve leaving behind the commonly shared notion of reality as composed of solid objects interacting like billiard balls in a Newtonian universe. The transforming universe of *The Folk of the Air* is more akin to that of Chinese painting, where cloud and mountain each can become the other through the medium of the Void. Beagle takes our imaginations through this process surreptitiously by means of images used in description: instead of a mountain becoming a cloud, a galliard becomes a child running downhill.

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Epic similes utilize just such a transforming and melding of things through the agency of a perceived likeness elaborated far beyond the extent of obvious or logical similarity. Cassirer says that in mythic thought such similarity produces "an area of logical indifference in which sensuous particulars continually merge with one another" (p. 69). One such magnificent imagistic cadenza describes a dinner from which Ben, Farrell's boyhood friend, is absent for mysterious reasons which Sia does not discuss. While eating in "a tightrope silence," Farrell recalls childhood dinners at which an aunt's flatulence led to embarrassed silences filled by discussions of recipes. Farrell now finds himself similarly chattering about garlic soup (pp. 123–124).

The unifying trait between the two situations is the uncomfortable silence at both dinner-table scenes, but whereas the flatulence of Aunt Dolores is audible and has widespread social impact, the disturbances at Farrell and Sia's dinner are all within Farrell's own head, though both result in people reciting recipes to fill the conversational void. In addition to conveying the quality of discomfort, the passage in effect transports the reader into "another" time, relative to the narrative's present. What has in fact happened to Ben is that he is having one of his "spells," in which he and a ninth-century Norseman named Egil Eyvindsson trade bodies. The Aunt Dolores epic simile serves a function analogous to visualization exercises in the beginning of a past-life regression. These exercises (visualizing oneself at one's home, extending one's body to float above one's home, etc.) prepare one for "leaving the body" and entering another in a previous incarnation—only in this case, the imaginational exercise is slipped in unannounced. Indeed, the images discussed above, which imbue events and objects with energy from Farrell's past, also stretch the reader's imagination by gently teasing the past into the present.

Farrell experiences much that is beyond his comprehension over the course of the narrative. However, at two instances on his first morning in Avicenna, Beagle draws our attention to the modality of consciousness somewhere between "the willing suspension of disbelief" and "going on automatic pilot" through his use of figures which personify and hence exaggerate the independent action of different parts of Farrell's bodymind:

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> The vision endured for less time than it took his eyes to translate, or his mind to sidestep, promising to write (p. 22).
>
> . . . his mind—having promptly skipped town, leaving no forwarding address but only those weary, cynical old suckers, his nerves and reflexes, to settle his debts and post bail one more time (p. 13).

This figure occurs in poetry down through the ages, from Philip the chancellor's thirteenth-century *Altercatio Cordis et Oculi*—in which the heart and the eye argue over which (who?) is responsible for letting a woman into the consciousness of a cleric (Raby, pp. 389–90)—to Paul Blackburn's *The Encounter* ("the Mexican bandit stood facing me. . . . My asshole / dropped out / and crawled all the way back to El Paso" [Allen, p. 76]). In this prose context, the figure carries the same humorous tone, but in addition it suggests the theme of disconnectedness (and disconnectability), presented far more seriously elsewhere in the narrative (e.g., in connection with Micah Willows and Ben).[1]

One of the most "bizarrely fantastic" images Beagle creates is his description of a marabou stork, which Farrell watches at the zoo as Ben explains his time-and-body switches. The stork's beak reminds him of "arms of lawn furniture, left outside all winter" and "its swollen pink pouch" of a testicle.

This grotesque description seems at first sight to have nothing whatever to do with the narrative. At least the intimations of discomfort suggested by recollections of Aunt Dolores' flatulence had a few explicit parallels drawn for our benefit. What is evoked here is an eerie atmosphere, as if someone has just started to vocalize the music from *The Twilight Zone*. Ben's revelation to Farrell becomes relatively less weird as the quality of present, objective reality is itself defamiliarized. The stork is described in such a way as seemingly to consist of misplaced parts—a pouch shaped like a testicle, a head shaped like an elbow with acne, a beak like arms of peeling lawn furniture.

1 Beagle says of such devices that "it seemed like a good idea at the time"—that is, they are not intended to be carrying the weight of Western literary tradition on them. I agree wholeheartedly—I merely draw attention to these parallels and affinities as a left-brained complement to the right-brained aesthetic perception of the novel's play with imagination.

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Similarly, Ben and Egil are intermittently displaced—somewhat less so Ben, who studies Old Norse, more so Egil, who must think he's insane when he finds himself in the twentieth century. The one point of direct analogical contact between the stork and the story is the pair of "astonishingly sweet brown eyes," which recall Ben's dolphin-like child's eyes. The contrast between the stork's eyes and the rest of its body encapsulates the transposition Farrell has seen between the crazed ninth-century Viking berserker and "the face of their childhood, soft and wise and secret . . ." (p. 188). The stork, as described, mirrors the dual nature of Ben, partly the boyhood friend known as "Rubberlips," partly the desperate Viking who almost smashes Farrell's face with a rock.

The stork also forms a bridge between the natural and the supernatural. As Farrell has said earlier in the text: "I don't have any particular trouble with the supernatural. It bewilders me about as much as the natural. I can't always tell them apart" (p. 141). People crossing the boundaries between one level of reality, or one time, and another, and the consequences of this disregard of the natural, make up the thematic core of this work. In the sections of the book where such issues are at last directly confronted, there is very little digression or descriptive imagery such as that discussed above. For the most part, truly fantastic events are discussed without the lengthy associational end runs such as those used to describe houses, dinnertime conversations, or omelettes. Perhaps Longinus' observation that the sublime is best evoked through a lack of stylistic artifice in certain situations is why, when Farrell is faced with a half-dozen real medieval warriors, his flight is described with a simple simile; he finds himself "making small noises like a garden hose or a steam radiator that has not been quite shut off" (p. 251).

Perhaps a young witch's sendings, creatures from Hieronymus Bosch, are in fact fantastic metaphors liberated from their referents: "one half-toad, half-gamecock," or "goat-legged viscera, fanged cacti . . . , creatures like stuffed toys oozing sewage" (p. 248). In passages dealing with the magical battle between the ancient Sia and the junior-high-school-age witch Aiffe, we are transported into the vortex of creation and transformation, where time, matter, form, thought, and sensation are all relative, mutable, and interchangeable. This is the Matrix of Being,

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and we agree in theory that it can be anywhere and anytime (or at least some of us do), but to imagine it in an old Victorian house in a quiet neighborhood in the Bay area, or in *any* particular setting, the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief must be gently led by the hand. Beagle prepares us through the elliptical, often synesthetic, leaping images used in description, and in so doing reminds us that the fantastic and the supernatural are immanent in the everyday and the natural.

One last category of images could be called "Neptunian," after the astrological conception of Neptune as the mystical planet, to whom, and to whose corner in us all, all things blend in one universal sea (Arroyo, p. 43; Lofthus, p. 175). Beagle prepares us to enter sensually into a Neptunian consciousness in his description of a motorcycle ride on a summer night, in which sounds and sensations of temperatures and of other energies blend through the image of the diver swimming under water, while radios and tape decks suggest a primeval jungle scene with alligators. This is another "decorative" image surreptitiously transforming the reader's consciousness. Music at one point brings the ocean into Farrell's circulatory system, with a recurrence of the diver image: "[the melody] began to dissolve into him, note by note, like bubbles of nitrogen in a diver's bloodstream" (p. 18).

Finally, Sia, mother and mistress, ancient woman in very contemporary contexts, creatress, friend of gods, is the character who wades across the boundaries that we mere mortals need to keep our sanity. As this Neptunian consciousness comes naturally to her, she is amused by Farrell's emotional outbursts deriving from his more limited view of reality. Her laughter "was almost too low for him to hear; it played at the edges of all his senses, like whale song" (p. 21). Synesthesia is a mode characteristic of "Neptunus, his mind leaping like dolphins." It is possibly the pre-eminent principle of the amusing and consciousness-stretching imagery in *The Folk of the Air*.

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